

VZCZCXRO1591
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHBS #1882/01 1590859
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 080859Z JUN 07 - ZDK UR SERVICE 1528
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5604
INFO RUCMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 001882

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/07/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: LETERME'S CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS GAIN MOMENTUM IN
FLEMISH POLLS AS ELECTION DRAWS NEAR

REF: A. BRUSSELS 1672 BRUSSELS 1642

[1](#)B. BRUSSELS 1576 BRUSSELS 1558 BRUSSELS 438

BRUSSELS 00001882 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLCOUNS TED ANDREWS. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) With the election just days away, the latest polls show the alliance of the centrist Christian Democrats and the moderate nationalist New Flemish Alliance (CD&V/NVA), headed by CD&V's Yves Leterme, leading in Flanders with close to thirty percent of the votes. If the voters confirm these polls and the French-speaking Christian Democrats perform well, the two Christian Democratic parties would form the biggest political family, putting Leterme in a good position to form Belgium's next governing coalition. (While the PM position has traditionally gone to the political family with the largest number of votes, there is no requirement for it.)

The Socialists, led by Johan Vande Lanotte, follow with close to twenty percent, and Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt's Liberals (OpenVLD) trail with approximately seventeen percent. Vlaams Belang (VB), an extremist anti-immigrant party, has about twenty percent also but, since no other party is as yet willing to serve in a government with VB, it will not figure in coalition formation calculations.

[1](#)2. (C) Leterme, who has been leading in the polls for almost a year, appears to be gaining momentum as acrimony spreads among the two leading francophone parties, internal conflict grows within the VB ranks, the Green parties gain strength, and the Prime Minister's reelection effort fails to catch fire. When polled, voters in Flanders ranked Leterme ahead of Verhofstadt as the candidate they would like to see as the next Prime Minister, with Flemish Socialist leader Vande Lanotte coming in third, followed by VB spokesman Filip De Winter.

[1](#)3. (C) The professorial, low-key Leterme has run his campaign on a platform of good governance, which includes fiscal responsibility and constitutional reform (a codeword for shifting powers to the regional governments), as well as calling for more state investment in improving Belgium's military capability. Leterme's campaign has criticized Verhofstadt's administration for issuing a string of "unkept promises" and called for "a better and different government."

Recognizing the continuing appeal of Flemish nationalists, Leterme has fended off calls by some (most notably, Didier Reynders, the francophone Liberal party leader and current Finance Minister) to ditch or weaken the separatist platform of Leterme's NVA partner, pledging that CD&V and NVA are "inextricably linked and cannot be separated after the elections." While the alliance with NVA has increased CD&V's voter base, concerns remain whether the partnership is big enough to produce enough votes to garner Leterme the PM position. CD&V Member of Parliament Pieter de Crem, a disappointed candidate for the post of party president, has

privately questioned whether his party's alliance with NVA will be enough to win and worries that the Socialists will therefore slip in, with Vande Lanotte anointed as PM.

14. (C) Vande Lanotte, however, has his own problems, having been recently forced to referee the conflict between the francophone liberals (MR) and socialists (PS). Prominent PS leaders have cast doubt on whether a governing coalition could comfortably include MR president Reynders, who in turn has slammed the socialists for corruption. PM Verhofstadt has gotten involved too, attempting to align himself with MR by telling Flemish voters that a vote for the Socialists or the Christian Democrats was a vote for PS and more economic stagnation in Wallonia. The Prime Minister knows that his best chance rests on the possibility of the two liberal parties together gaining over 40 parliamentary seats. Flemish socialist leader Vande Lanotte, cognizant of the decisive role traditionally played by the Flemish vote, has made clear that he too would dump his francophone counterparts if doing so would win him the top job.

15. (C) Leterme's chances for success are good, but not absolute. He is hampered by the need to follow through on his state reform promise, a promise to which NVA will hold him. Some observers see PS, a potential partner in a government coalition, as the problem with this plan because "no French-speaking party wants state reform." They realize that any reform would mean less money for the French-speaking region, and more responsibility for the governments of the French-speaking areas. Leterme has consistently said he will not compromise his principles, including state reform, for the PM seat (in an early "show of principle," Leterme briefly withdrew from his NVA alliance when the nationalist party allowed controversial Flemish politician Jean-Marie Dedecker to join. Dedecker departed when NVA, seeking to placate CD&V, failed to put him on their candidates list).

16. (C) Having Leterme in the Prime Minister's office poses

BRUSSELS 00001882 002 OF 002

no obvious dangers to U.S. interests. If Leterme becomes PM, he will have some catching up to do on foreign policy, notably on security policy issues. Focused on domestic issues throughout his tenure as Minister-President of Flanders and throughout this campaign, his foreign policy priorities are a bit hazy at this point. He has been progressive on social issues (one of his staffers thought CD&V would want to head the Ministry of Social Affairs and Public Health when a government is formed), and, as head of the Flemish government, he has spearheaded programs to more fully integrate Muslim immigrants into Flanders. He was against the war in Iraq but favors a more capable Belgian defense. His mission has always been state reform, with a heavy emphasis on extending more competencies to Belgium's regions. Indeed, some have said Leterme, already powerful as Minister-President of the economically viable Flanders, seeks federal power merely as a means to extend more power to Flanders.

17. (C) A Vande Lanotte premiership does pose a potential threat. Although the former minister's personal views are somewhat inchoate, he has given so many hostages to the pacifist/extreme-left wing of his party that he might not have much room to maneuver on important policy issues like providing aid to Afghanistan. The Flemish socialists have a strong pacifist tradition and Vande Lanotte has proposed halving the defense budget. A coalition led by his SP.A would be more difficult for US interests in NATO, defense, and regional security operations. We note, however, that no one ever went broke betting on the ability of Belgian politicians to eat their words when it comes to choosing a ministerial seat.

FOX

.